



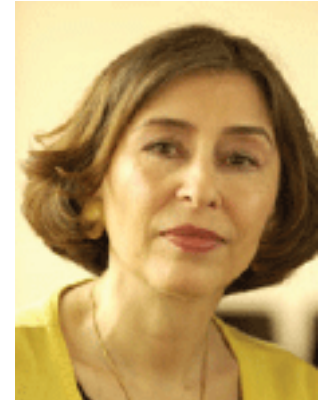
Azar Nafisi

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A good novel is one that shows the complexity of individuals, and creates enough space for all of these characters to have a voice; in this way a novel is called democratic—not that it advocates democracy but by nature is so. Empathy lies at the heart of [The Great] Gatsby, like so many other great novels—the biggest sin is to be blind to others’ problems and pains. Not seeing them means denying their existence.

— Reading Lolita in Tehran

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Biography

Professor and writer Azar Nafisi was born in 1955 in Tehran, Iran. Her father Ahmed Nafisi was the mayor of Tehran and her mother Nezhat Nafisi was one of the first women to serve on Iranian parliament. The Nafisi family had a passion for literature and exposed young Nafisi to stories of Persian classics during family walks and before bedtime. At an early age, Nafisi developed an appreciation for literature that would ultimately be the focus of her literary career.

Quick Facts

- * Born in 1955
- * Iranian journalist, writer, and academic; lives in the U.S.
- * Wrote *Reading Lolita in Tehran*

This page researched and submitted by Victoria Mfon and Elizabeth Selander on 12/20/06.



Azar Nafisi

Biography continued

Nafisi was educated in Switzerland but returned to Iran when her father was imprisoned. She later attended the University of Oklahoma, earning a PhD in English and American Literature. At the University of Oklahoma, Nafisi joined the Iranian student movement, but was more interested in the opportunity to examine revolutionary writings such as Engels' *Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State* and Marx's *The 18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*. Nafisi felt conflicted as a member of the Iranian student movement because she appreciated Western literature despite protesting against Western imperialism.

After obtaining her PhD and her fellowship at Oxford University, Nafisi returned to Iran in 1979 and taught American literature at the University of Tehran. 1979 was a crucial time in Iranian history; it marked the rise of Ayatollah Khomeini, an influential figure of the Islamic Revolution. His vision was for Iran to be ruled as an Islamic state. The veil was enforced for Iranian women and strict regulations were implemented in order for women to have conservative roles. Nafisi was enraged by the restrictions placed on women. She felt that the rules stripped women of their individuality. Being educated in the West, Nafisi was exposed to the political and personal freedoms of Western women, and growing up in pre-Revolutionary Iran, she had known women to have more freedom.

In Tehran, Nafisi taught Western classics such as *The Great Gatsby*, *Daisy Miller*, and *Pride and Prejudice*, books that were banned by the Iranian government because they contradicted the values of Islam. Some revolutionary students reacted negatively to the books she taught, believing that the characters acted immorally and justified the selfish views of Western civilization. In 1981, Nafisi was expelled from the University of Tehran for refusing to wear the veil. She taught at the Free Islamic University and Allameh Tabatabai University until she quit her teaching positions in 1995. She then formed a reading book group with several of her best female students where she secretly taught Western novels, such as *Lolita*, *Invitation to a Beheading*, and *Madame Bovary*. Nafisi challenged her students to establish a connection between the novels and contemporary Iran. Nafisi's secret reading group was the inspiration for her critically acclaimed novel, *Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books*.

Nafisi left Iran for the US in 1997. She wrote op-ed articles for publications such as *The New York Times*, *Washington Post*, and *The New Republic* about the political relevance of literature and culture as well as human rights for Iranian women. Also, some of her articles focused on the relations between the United States and the Middle East and how people can avoid misconceptions of the Middle East portrayed by the West.



Azar Nafisi

Biography continued

In her article, “The Veiled Threat,” the cover story for the February 22nd 1999 issue of the *New Republic*, she criticizes the Iranian government for the harsh restrictions placed on women. She also talked about the importance of Iranian women historical figures and how the restrictions prevent Iranian women from having a history. Nafisi asserts that making the veil mandatory for women conflicts with their Islamic faith. “For some traditional women, the imposition of the veil was an affront to their religiosity—changing what had been a freely chosen expression of religious faith into a rote act imposed on them by the state. My grandmother was one such a woman. An intensely religious woman who never parted with her chador, she was nonetheless outraged at those who had defiled her religion by using violence to impose their interpretation of it on her grandchildren. ‘This is not Islam!’ she would insist.” Nafisi presented her grandmother’s testimonial as a rebuttal to those who believed that imposing the veil on women was an affirmation of Islam. She used this argument to point out that the extreme actions under Khomeini’s rule were against the values of Islam.

Nafisi wrote many of her articles before she published *Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books* in 2003; therefore, many of the ideas in these writings are reinforced in *Reading Lolita in Tehran*. The novel follows Nafisi’s struggles as an English professor in post revolutionary Iran. She uses reading and writing as resistance against the stringent rules imposed on women in Iran. In *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, Nafisi references many Western classic novels, but she focused the majority of her analysis on four novels: Vladimir Nabokov’s *Lolita*, F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*, Henry James’ *Daisy Miller*, and Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*. Nafisi divides *Reading Lolita in Tehran* into four parts, each focusing on the particular author and his or her novels. Each section intertwines the novel Nafisi covers with specific phases in her life in Iran as well as the events that take place during the Revolution. She emphasizes the importance of literature despite moral views of the characters.

Generally *Reading Lolita in Tehran* has received positive criticism. Most critics agree that the book offers a fresh perspective on literature. Throughout the novel, the reader is able to see just how much Nafisi is in love with books. The use of literary analysis is essential because it establishes a connection between the characters in these books and the lives of her students. *Reading Lolita in Tehran* emphasizes how books can be relatable to a particular audience and how it opens doors to the freedom of a person’s imagination. Critic Katie Flint concurs that *Reading Lolita in Tehran* shows an appreciation for Western literature that many people take for granted. She respects the fact that Nafisi uses reading as an escape from gender oppression.



Azar Nafisi

Biography continued

While many critics commend Nafisi for the use of literary analysis, she is also criticized for the selection of books she discussed in *Reading Lolita in Tehran*. Critics from the *Complete Review* feel that Nafisi concentrates too much on Western literature and fails to include Persian writing. Perhaps it is because she writes for an American audience and readers would be unfamiliar with prominent Iranian writers. Nonetheless, by excluding Iranian literature, the reader is only exposed to Western ideas of literature. “Nafisi taught foreign literature, nevertheless, it’s astonishing how completely any and all Iranian fiction is ignored in this book...Her refusal to do so also seems again to demonstrate her unwillingness to consider that literature might be relevant in other ways than she allows for” (*Complete Review*). *Reading Lolita in Tehran* promotes the ideas of freedom and imagination, but restricting works to Western literature offers a limited perspective of life in Iran during the Iranian Revolution.

Perhaps it is this idea that makes Nafisi’s memoir controversial. Some critics believe that Nafisi favors Western ideologies, therefore making the novel biased and inaccurate. Throughout the novel, it is clear that Nafisi disagrees with the Iranian laws placed to restrict women of their rights. Her observations stem from living in Iran before the Revolution where women had more personal freedoms. In her memoir Nafisi makes historical references to the Revolution to support her arguments. Critic Walter Corbella believes that her historical assessments portray the Iranian government negatively and inadequately. He states, “Nafisi does not look beyond its [Islam fundamentalism] outward manifestations—its terrorist practices, its slogans, and its posters—so she fails to see it’d inherent flaws and how these could cause its structure of domination to unravel.”

One of the more extensive critiques of *Reading Lolita in Tehran* comes from Hamid Dasbashi, professor of Iranian studies and comparative literature at Columbia University. In his essay, “Native informers and the making of the American empire,” Dasbashi suggests that the novel is partly responsible for the current relations between the US and Iran and also that the novel is a propaganda tool for imperialism. He also accuses Nafisi for her relationships with neoconservatives. Although his attacks seem extreme, his rhetoric is valid. He expands on his claims by saying that Nafisi slanders Iranian “revolutionary resistance to a history of savage colonialism, doing so by blatantly advancing the presumed cultural foregrounding of a predatory empire.”



Azar Nafisi

Biography continued

Many of Nafisi's colleagues, who are familiar with Iranian studies and with *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, say that Dabashi's arguments are too radical. Janet Afary, Professor of History and Women's Studies at Purdue University says that the novel holds the virtue of recalling the real events that happened during the Iranian Revolution. "I have a lot of respect for Hamid Dabashi's work. But Azar Nafisi's work is a literary work. These were the harshest years. They were executing girls of 12 and 13. The stories are true. These things really have happened."

Despite the controversy, *Reading Lolita in Tehran* is considered a strong literary work. It is not a simple task to intertwine literary analysis within a memoir while holding the interest of the reader. Nafisi has provided her account of her life in Iran during the Revolution. Her ability to use literature as means of resistance is what makes *Reading Lolita in Tehran* successful. Her love for literature has won the hearts of many readers and through other writings, she continues to incorporate the use of literature to address political issues in the Middle East. Currently, Nafisi is a Visiting Fellow and professorial lecturer at the Foreign Policy Institute of the John Hopkins University's School of Advanced International Studies and is the director of the Dialogue Project, an initiative to educate non Muslims of the Muslim world.



Azar
Nafisi

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